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The *ateneo* as an effective model of continuing professional development: findings from southern Argentina

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ABSTRACT

Despite a sustainable research interest in different forms of teachers' professional development, scant international attention has been paid to forms of professional development which are implemented in South America. Based on a qualitative research design, this study explores the impact of the *ateneo* as an innovative model of continuing professional development. An *ateneo* is a model which supports teacher reflection and change in teaching practices by concentrating on context-responsive practical issues such as lesson planning and delivery. The study was carried out with 22 teachers of English as a foreign language in southern Argentina. Data were gathered through the teachers' lesson plans, whole group discussions, and the teachers' final assignments to receive credits for completion of the *ateneo*. Drawing on thematic analysis, the participants envisaged the *ateneo* as a practice-oriented, dynamic, interaction-based, and personal as well as collective space for developing teaching skills and professional knowledge. In particular, findings show that the participants exhibited an improvement in lesson contextualization, sequencing and transitioning, maximization of resources, class time management, and reflective teaching. The study argues that the *ateneo* became successful given the shared teacher identity among the participants and the course tutors, and the explicit focus on the teachers' daily practices.

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Introduction

Teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) has been at the centre of extensive research, initiatives, and models to support teachers' professional and personal growth in ways that are pedagogically appropriate through the combination of practice and theory (Avidov-Ungar, 2016). Effective CPD is viewed as a learning-oriented, situated process (De Vries et al., 2013) that allows teachers to update their professional knowledge, skills, and ultimately to develop agency through personal and collective reflective practice (Farrell, 2018a, 2018b; Kuusisaari, 2013; Sprott, 2019). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) stress that effective CPD should feature active learning supported by peers and experts that result in changes in teachers' practices and improvements in learners' outcomes.

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The field of English language teaching (ELT) has been active in supporting English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers at the intersection of theory and practice in CPD. A large body of research has been conducted in the last decade to understand how different CPD models enhance L2 teachers' knowledge base (e.g. Cheng & Pan, 2019; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2019; Yuan & Burns, 2017). The research provides support for the implementation of collaborative undertakings that position teachers as knowledge-creators of appropriate L2 pedagogies. Notwithstanding, a closer look at the dominant English-medium studies in ELT reveals that there is a dearth of international publications which examine CPD initiatives developed in Latin America. Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate how *ateneo* as a specific CPD model contributes to EFL teachers' CPD and how it facilitates EFL teachers' reflective practices that may shape their ongoing professional growth. We refer to this model in Spanish as the relevant literature on this model and concomitant experiences are situated in Spanish-speaking contexts, yet the implications are expected to be practiced by international teachers and teacher educators on their path to professional growth.

In this paper, we first conceptualize the notion of *ateneo*. We then describe the context of the study and the participants, two groups of EFL teachers in southern Argentina, and how the *ateneo* was implemented. The research methodology is also described. Drawing on thematic analysis, the findings show the areas in which the participating teachers experienced a growth in CPD. Finally, we discuss the findings and suggest implications for (L2) teacher education.

Ateneo: definition and features

In Argentina, there has been a strong shift towards school-centred CPD (Alliaud & Vezub, 2014) with the aim of working with the schools and with the issues that teachers face (Aguirre & Ramallo, 2017). Davini (2015) emphasizes that teachers' situated professional practices are complex and multifactorial, and therefore, CPD activities need to empower teachers to reflect and act on their practices through the deployment of informed decisions and context-responsive pedagogies they have co-constructed supported by conceptual frameworks they find meaningful. As a response to this shift, the notion of *ateneo* has been embraced by teacher education programmes and ministerial policies.

The term *ateneo* comes from the Latin word *Athenaeum* (temple of Minerva in Athens). The term refers to the classical, in Greek terms, practice of thinkers meeting to read and discuss their works and ideas. In medicine, the term is often employed to describe a meeting where different medical doctors discuss a real-life case. According to Alarcón et al. (2011), the concept of *ateneo* refers to cultural associations and meetings in which new ideas are promoted as a means to address a diversity of issues contextually relevant.

In the area of teacher education, the *ateneo didáctico* (didactic) can be conceptualized as a mechanism which allows critical and collective reflection. In Argentina, it was first used in the City of Buenos Aires in the 1990s to support novice teachers (teachers who have recently graduated and have less than three years of experience) during their first teaching post in primary schools. Since then, the national and provincial ministries of education have employed it as a supporting device with novice teachers as well as with experienced teachers in different disciplines particularly after new educational reforms (e.g. a new curriculum) have been introduced. It has also been employed to support

teachers' continuing professional development (Alen & Allegroni, 2009). The ateneo is led by a tutor, who is an expert in the professional practice of one specific subject or area, for example, second language teaching (Sanjurjo, 2009). The tutors are usually experienced teacher educators with postgraduate degrees in the field of education.

As a mechanism or device for CPD, the ateneo seeks to promote a horizontal relationship among teachers and the tutor, even when the latter is an expert, for the collective and personal (de)construction of teachers' practices and the development of contextualized and pedagogically informed interventions (Cecotti, Damiani, & Tévez, 2018). Nonetheless, differences in expertise and self-perceived professional identity among teachers and tutors may undermine the expected horizontal relationship. Despite this caveat, Clavijo et al. (2012) suggest that the ateneo may be assessed as an effective teachers' CPD model as it generates instances of analysis, reflection, systematization, and transformation of teaching practices through the discussion of specific cases and how to respond to them. Drawing on a study carried out with different educational institutions, Garro and Strazza Tello (2012) add that the ateneo can also become a space for the development of a bank of teaching materials.

Concerning its implementation, an ateneo usually consists of six to eight meetings and often includes a reduced number (between 10 and 15) of teachers and a tutor. In the first meeting, the teachers discuss pedagogical issues drawn from their own practice they would like to address through a series of lessons. Even though the teachers may have a similar concern, the aim is that each teacher develops a lesson plan with the support of the others. The tutor's role is to offer pedagogical and research-based support and provide reading material. The teachers refine their lesson plans and share them with the tutor before implementation for further feedback. In the following meeting, the teachers share the outcomes of the lesson implementation, and work on a new lesson plan based on emerging issues. The teachers also develop or adapt teaching materials particularly designed for the lesson. The ateneo may entail peer/tutor- classroom observation depending on human resources availability. The ateneo has a high degree of flexibility as it is shaped by the teachers' individual concerns. De Morais Melo and Barcia (2014) suggest that the ateneo pedagógico contributes to the development of professional autonomy as teachers engage in appropriating and producing new and situated knowledge in praxis (Freire, 1979).

Drawing on a recent review of CPD (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019), the ateneo may be characterized as a combination of formal and informal approaches as the ateneo is organized by an institution such as a school or Ministry of Education (formal), but the content is determined by the participating teachers, who enrol voluntarily. Specifically, an ateneo may be viewed as a type of job-embedded professional development (Griffith et al., 2014) as reflections and actions derive from and contribute to the teachers' practices. While the ateneo is seen as an effective CPD model, to our knowledge there are no studies on how teachers may understand it, and what impact it may have on them. Therefore, the present study aims to answer two questions:

RQ1: How did the EFL teachers perceive the ateneo in their reflection on ateneo-based teacher education?

RQ2: In what ways did the ateneo impact on these EFL teachers' reflection and continuing professional development?

The study also seeks to fill two major gaps detected in high-impact journals: (1) the underrepresentation of Latin America in ELT and teacher education studies, and (2) the lack of studies on language teachers' professional development in low-resource countries (Guo et al., 2019).

Context

The context of this study is the province of Chubut, southern Argentina. In Chubut, English as a foreign language is a compulsory subject present in grades 7–12 of secondary education. Due to a shortage of qualified teachers, schools may employ people without a teaching degree provided they formally demonstrate knowledge of English (e.g. a Cambridge First Certificate in English). In the public sector, teachers' salaries are only calculated on the number of teaching hours they teach. Therefore, teachers do not normally have one full-time post, but a collection of teaching hours in different schools. The Ministry of Education in Chubut offers optional CPD opportunities for all, qualified and unqualified, EFL teachers. However, they are attractive as they hold official recognition and therefore those who successfully complete the coursework obtain points which count towards obtaining more teaching hours. Due to teachers' heavy workload, CPD opportunities are usually delivered on Saturdays or in ways which demand little extra time from teachers.

In 2019, in our capacity as teacher educators and members of the Ministry of Education ELT Team, we were asked to collaboratively design and individually deliver an ateneo for EFL teachers in two different cities in Chubut. The ateneo was entitled *English in secondary education: Reflections and practices*; it lasted three months, and it totalled 51 hours, which included six meetings (one every two weeks), teachers' lesson design and delivery, and discussion forums on a virtual learning environment provided by the Ministry of Education. The aims of the ateneo were: (1) to enact the L2 curriculum through the design and delivery of context-responsive lessons, (2) to engage in reflective practice (Farrell, 2018a, 2018b; Schön, 1983), (3) to engage in collaborative work, and (4) to develop teaching skills in response to issues detected in the classroom. To avoid demotivating teachers with low English language proficiency, the ateneo was carried out in Spanish; nevertheless, supporting reading material was supplied in English (e.g. Scrivener, 2011). To offer personalized feedback, up to 12 teachers were included in the ateneo. The ateneo required that teachers were based in state secondary education schools, and that they attended at least five of the six meetings and completed all the tasks set to pass the course.

Each meeting comprised reading the official EFL curriculum for secondary education and the discussion of cases from the participating teachers' practices. Drawing on Yin's (2018) conceptualization, a case study allows a teacher to discuss and pedagogically intervene based on a particular and real classroom situation. Hence, the meetings included the drafting of lesson plans to respond to the cases, reflections based on the implementation of previous lesson plans, and agreement on assessment practices. These activities were followed-up by individual tutoring through which each teacher would email a lesson plan to the tutor for constructive feedback. Our feedback included questions requesting clarification and suggestions (e.g. activities, classroom procedures). The teachers were asked to keep a journal with the aim of noting the challenges and benefits found throughout the ateneo.

In the last meeting, a group discussion was held around these questions: (1) How would you describe the ateneo?, (2) What features of the ateneo would you perceive as obstructors or enablers in your professional development?, (3) Based on your journal, did you face any challenges regarding lesson planning and implementation?, (4) Have you noticed any changes in your practice as a result of attending the ateneo?, (5) Has sharing your experiences with colleagues made an impact on your own professional development and reflective practice? As a final assignment, each teacher had to submit their written answers to these questions. While questions 1 and 2 were linked to RQ1, questions 3–5 were included to answer RQ2. It should be noted that the ateneo delivery did not always develop as planned due to teacher strikes and socioeconomic turmoil in Chubut in 2019.

Methodology

This study is grounded in an inductive qualitative research design (Bryman, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), embedded in the CPD model described above. Within the paradigm of qualitative research we adopted an ecological perspective. By an ecological perspective, we refer to data collection and interpretation of findings in the context in which the data originated (Banegas & Consoli, 2020; Edwards & Burns, 2016): the ateneo. Hence, data collection did not demand teachers' extra time. In terms of ethical procedures, all the teachers consented in writing to the use of the data gathered provided that confidentiality and anonymity were secured. The names used to refer to them in this paper are pseudonyms. We should acknowledge that our dual identity as ateneo tutors and researchers may have created unequal power dynamics that led the teachers to accept to become research participants and only voice positive comments on our practice.

The study included all the participating teachers in each group (Table 1): 12 from City A and 10 from City B. Out of the 22 participants, 14 had a bachelor's degree as teachers of English as a foreign language (BA TEFL), six had no formal teacher education training

Table 1. Participants.

Group	Pseudonym	Age	Degree	Years of teaching experience	School type
City A	Alina	48	BA TEFL	27	State secondary school, urban
	Ana	45	BA TEFL	25	State secondary school, urban
	Ari	45	None	24	State secondary school, technical, urban
	Bea	43	BA TEFL	21	State secondary school, rural
	Blanca	41	None	19	State secondary school, urban
	Berta	39	BA TEFL	16	Private secondary school, urban
	Cari	35	BA TEFL	17	State secondary school, technical, urban
	Ceci	32	BA TEFL	12	State secondary school, technical, urban
	Celso	30	BA TEFL	15	State secondary school, urban
	Diana	27	BA TEFL	4	State secondary school, urban
	Denise	27	BA TEFL	4	State secondary school, urban
	Dora	25	BA TEFL	2	State secondary school, urban
City B	Estefi	45	BA in Translation	12	State secondary school, urban
	Erna	42	BA TEFL	13	State secondary school, urban
	Fede	40	None	18	State secondary school, rural
	Fabi	40	BA TEFL	12	State secondary school, urban
	Grace	38	BA TEFL	12	Private secondary school, urban
	Hilda	36	BA TEFL	12	State secondary school, urban
	Indi	36	None	6	State secondary school, urban
	Jacinta	35	BA in Education	2	State secondary school, rural
	Kari	24	None	2	State secondary school, urban
	Luna	23	None	1	State secondary school, rural

except for short professional development courses, and two had degrees in other areas such as translation or education. When combining the two groups, the mean age was 36.18 and the mean years of teaching experience was 12.54. All the participants taught English in urban or rural secondary schools.

Data were obtained through these instruments:

- Teachers' lesson plans: Each teacher submitted at least two versions of three lesson plans. A total of 132 lesson plans were analyzed.
- End-of-ateneo whole group discussion: The discussions, one with each group and led by each tutor, were audiorecorded and orthographically transcribed. In this discussion, the participants shared their views on the extent to which the ateneo had had an impact on their CPD and practices.
- Teachers' final assignment: We analysed 22 final assignments. In this assignment, the participants answered the five questions listed above.

The data were read and reread to identify emerging themes. Using thematic analysis procedures (Clarke & Braun, 2016; Silverman, 2020), we engaged in arriving, through discussion, at axial codes and unifying themes connected to the research questions. For intersubjectivity and reliability purposes, a colleague external to the initiative acted as an inter-rater by analyzing 40% of the data collected. Dissonances between the coders were solved through revisiting the data and codes until agreement was reached at 88%, which was agreed as a reasonable measure of trustworthiness. With the aim of increasing the trustworthiness and transparency of our study, Table 2 shows the axial codes, unifying themes (which condense such codes), and examples from the data. The unifying themes included in Table 2 act as organizers of the Findings section. It should be clarified that there were no substantial differences between the two groups as each unifying theme derived from thematic analysis was found in the data from both groups.

Findings

In the sections below, the research findings are presented according to the two research questions formulated.

How the participants perceived the ateneo

Thematic analysis of the 22 participants' data yielded the following categories (the numbers in brackets indicate the frequency of responses): 1. the ateneo as a practice-oriented space (22), 2. the ateneo as a dynamic space (22), and 3. the ateneo as a place for constructing an inclusive and supportive community of practice (18). Such categories reflect and extend the characteristics of the ateneo described above. While the literature describes associates the ateneo to analysis, reflection, systematization and transformation of teaching practices, the participants not only confirmed these features but remarked the practice-oriented and collective perspective (community of practice) it entails. The four identified categories are described below.

Table 2. Thematic analysis.

Axial codes	Unifying themes	Examples from the data
Personalised content Focus on individual practice Individual-oriented	The ateneo as practice-oriented	"The ateneo responds to my practice, what I go through in the classroom."
Flexibility Interaction Fluidity Problem-solving Orientation to teachers' concerns	The ateneo as a dynamic space	"There's always something different. It's activity as we engage in dealing with the issues we bring in."
Social support Collective thinking Empathy Reflection Professionalization in collective thinking	Construction and support of a community of practice	"The ateneo has become a place for learning as a community as we're all in this together."
Systematic reflection Noticing Tutor role Peer support	Reflective practice	"I pay more attention to my own decisions, even what I say in class."
Critical thinking Critical reading Creativity Valuing personal practice	Professional awareness	"How does this article resonate with practice? Can I adapt this idea? Can I do something different?"
Improvement of teaching skills Professional knowledge Confidence Tutor and peer feedback	Pedagogically informed decisions	"If I want to sequence my activities in a certain way, I need to understand what support I have for it."

Every participant perceived the ateneo as “practice-oriented” or “practical”. The unanimous perception was that the format, unlike others they had experienced in other CPD initiatives, prioritized their situated and ordinary practices:

- I’d describe the ateneo as highly practical, practice-oriented. It was all about what happens to us in the real classroom day by day. (Ari, Extract 1)
- I see the ateneo as oriented towards my practice, not just practice. It’s personalized, it focuses on me as a teacher. (Indi, Extract 2)

The above quotes show that personalization was a central feature welcomed by the participants. The ateneo was found to be practical and practice-oriented as the ideas derived from and in response to each teacher’s scenario were suggested by peers from the same city.

The dynamicity perceived in the ateneo related to its flexible agenda, interactive nature, and resources:

- I think the ateneo was a dynamic initiative because even though the whole course was on lesson planning and delivery, each meeting was different as it depended on our concerns, plans, or experiences. That made it helpful and I was like wanting to take part even it was on Saturdays. (Ceci, Extract 3)

The ateneo was dynamic because there was a lot of interaction among us peers and with the tutor. The dialogues were enriching they also extended to the tutor's formative feedback, usually framed as questions, and the forums on the virtual learning environment. (Fede, Extract 4)

Extracts 3 and 4 illustrate the positive reception that tutor-moderated interaction among peers both face-to-face and virtual had on the participants' description and evaluation of the ateneo. Extract 3 highlights the value of adapting content delivery to teachers' daily teaching concerns and critical incidents. Furthermore, Fede (Extract 4) emphasizes that the tutors' feedback mostly provided as questions increased the correlation between dynamicity and interaction. In this sense, even the tutors' formative feedback was perceived as another dimension of interaction.

A third emerging category was the participants' perception of the ateneo as a place for constructing an inclusive and supportive community of practice. While the first category described above framed practice as an individual construct, that is, each teacher's situated practice, this category emphasizes the social, collaborative, and interactive (see previous category) dimension:

I think the ateneo is a place or a form of building a community of teachers. Talking to peers, seeing that we have the same issues has reduced my stress and anxiety about teaching and I feel ok even if I don't have a degree. Every time I attend the meetings, I go back home with new strategies and ideas and we can even share resources. (Blanca, Extract 5)

The ateneo is a type of community of teachers. And because it's a participatory community, we're all equal and we support and encourage each other as a group. (Erna, Extract 6)

The extracts above reflect the horizontal architecture of the initiative among the teachers. Even when each group had a tutor, the participants envisaged the ateneo as an opportunity to construct a community of local teachers who shared similar concerns and could support each other by sharing their stories, strategies, and resources despite their personal trajectories.

Based on the three categories emerging from the analysis, the ateneo was perceived as a practice-oriented and context-responsive form of professional development. According to the participants, the ateneo not only provided them with instances of personal growth through reflection but also with opportunities for contributing to a professional community of practice. Hence, the ateneo emerged as a practice-based CPD model through which reflective practice was achieved in dialogic inquiry (De Morais Melo & Barcia, 2014).

Impact on teachers' professional development and reflective practice

Aligned with previous studies (e.g. Clavijo et al., 2012; Garro & Strazza Tello, 2012; De Morais Melo & Barcia, 2014), analysis of the participants' lesson plans, discussions, and assignments revealed that the ateneo contributed to the enhancement of reflective practices, professional awareness, and pedagogically informed decisions. These three enhanced areas could be traced to self-reported and evidence-based changes across the participants' lesson planning and delivery, and professional knowledge articulated in the data gathered.

According to our analysis of the participant's lesson plans, they exhibited changes in the following areas (the numbers in brackets represent frequency): 1. lesson

contextualization (19), 2. sequencing and transitioning (17), 3. maximizing resources (15), and 4. time management (14).

One example may illustrate these four areas. In her second lesson plan, Jacinta sought to teach her group of 15-year-olds the function of describing typical routines (present simple). Her lesson started with showing her students decontextualized pictures of people doing different activities (e.g. a woman having breakfast). Then, she included a letter about a student describing life in the UK, with gaps to use the verbs in the first activity. She would then provide the learners with different texts and dialogues for them to correct grammatical inaccuracies and order the dialogue lines, respectively.

Based on the tutor's feedback and suggestions offered by other teachers in the ateneo, she revised her lesson plan as follows. First, she contextualized the lesson under the topic "Life in Corcovado and the UK" (Corcovado is a small town close to the rural school). As a warm-up and presentation, she would tell the students the lesson aims and ask them to make a list of the daily activities they could say in English. She then showed them self-made pictures of teenagers engaged in different routines in Corcovado and the UK. She would use them to introduce new grammatical structures and vocabulary. She used the pictures to compare and contrast what teenagers may do. As a follow-up activity, she created two e-mails, a correspondence between a student living in Corcovado, and a student living in Leeds. The students were asked to answer a set of comprehension questions and then highlight key words and structures in the e-mail. Following some cues, they would finally write a similar e-mail in response to the UK student's email. When she was asked to comment on the lesson delivery, Jacinta expressed:

I focused on one context, and that engaged the students because it was something about themselves, their lives. I learnt to use a context and to maximize resources. Rather than having different texts, I focused on the pictures and the emails. I exploited them more. I also exploited more the students' prior knowledge. And the lesson was better organized. Now, I focused more on the reading, the emails, I made them notice the new linguistic items, and then they wrote an email, but based on the cues I gave them and the language I highlighted in the lesson. I made sure there was a more logical sequence from less to more demanding activities. Unlike other times, this time I could complete the lesson plan. I'm now more confident about planning lessons which are not crammed with activities, and so I can manage the lesson time more efficiently. (Jacinta, Extract 7)

The participants' professional knowledge was also enhanced through the ateneo. According to the participants, peer and tutor feedback and listening to other teachers' experiences enabled them to revisit their own beliefs and be critical about external sources of professional knowledge:

The ateneo allowed me to develop professional knowledge by listening to my colleagues. Not only did I benefit from their ideas and materials but also from their reflections. Their reflections enabled me to reflect on my own conceptions and concepts I have learnt. I feel that now I can make pedagogical decisions not only based on external sources, but also on my critical views and those of my peers (Estefi, Extract 8)

I think that the ateneo contributed to the expansion of my professional knowledge. The feedback from my fellow teachers as the tutor as an expert guide made me become more aware of my decisions when planning or teaching and why I make them. (Celso, Extract 9)

Extracts 8 and 9 reflect ateneo features such as analysis, reflection, and systematization (Clavijo et al., 2012). Drawing on the extracts above, the participants saw professional knowledge as a context-responsive personal and collaborative construction which was based on their internal trajectories. While external sources were acknowledged, the ateneo helped them develop systematic reflection and noticing of their own beliefs and perceptions. In other words, criticality and reflection flourished in interaction with other teachers they could relate to. For example, the following quotes come from the first and last lesson plan submitted by Estefi. In both cases, she had been asked to support the inclusion of focus-on-form activities.

I have included exercises which focus on the form of asking questions because grammar is important. The structure of the sentence, according to what I studied, does not change, and without a clear question, we cannot expect a clear answer. (Estefi, Lesson Plan 1, Extract 10)

In this lesson plan, I incorporated an exercise on the forms of present continuous, but I have made sure that the sentences to complete have the same context and express different meanings or intentionalities. As we discussed in the last meeting, it is important that our exercises are set in a context which is familiar to the learners. In this case, I now understand that I may include present continuous to ask the students to describe pictures that appear in a local newspaper's Instagram account. (Estefi, Lesson Plan 3, Extract 11)

While in Extract 10 Estefi refers to sources she studied while completing her BA degree in Translation, in Extract 11 she includes one ateneo meeting as a source of her justification for including a form-focused activity which does not disregard meaning in context.

Despite the positive findings presented above, two participants also indicated that they would have liked to receive stronger theoretical support to stimulate their professional knowledge:

I think the ateneo should have included more reading material to guide our understanding. (Fede, Extract 12)

In my opinion, we could have been offered more theoretical support such as books about English language teaching methodology and approaches. (Indi, Extract 13)

Extracts 12 and 13 come from two of the participants who did not have any teaching degree in English language teaching. This might explain their need for further input through reading material. At the same time, it highlights their interest to expand their professional knowledge by means of relevant literature as a legitimate fund of professional knowledge which, in turn, could legitimize their identity as EFL teachers.

In light of the findings obtained, the ateneo had a positive impact on the participants' teaching skills, reflection, and understanding of potential sources of professional knowledge. In both cases, the systematization of an attitude towards reflective practice directed the participants to delve into their own beliefs as well as engage in interactive reflection with peers and the tutor. Nevertheless, the imbalance created by our identity as tutors and researchers supporting and examining teachers while examining the effects of our practice may have driven the participating teachers to be less open about negative aspects of our performance.

Discussion

Echoing the literature reviewed above (e.g. Cecotti et al., 2018; Clavijo et al., 2012), the ateneo seemed to have succeeded as a teachers' CPD model given its focus on practice as a catalyst for teachers' analysis, reflection, systematization and transformation of their teaching practice through a collective space (community of practice). Specifically, the ateneo exerted a positive impact on two broad, interconnected areas: teaching skills and professional knowledge. It should be clarified that the positives outcomes reported by the participants should be circumscribed to the period when the ateneo was implemented.

The participants perceived the ateneo as practice-oriented, personalized, dialogical, and interactive. These features not only confirm the school-centred or job-embedded (Griffith et al., 2014) nature of the ateneo as a context-responsive form of professional development. They also highlight the centrality that the teacher, as an individual-in-context, plays out in the model. This latter aspect appears as an original characteristic to consider. While the literature stresses the collective dimension of the ateneo (Davini, 2015), the participants experienced the ateneo both as a social and personal space. As a social space, they remarked the dialogic anatomy of each meeting, which also extended to the online forum discussions and tutor feedback. The social space was captured in the participants viewing the ateneo as a place for constructing an inclusive and supportive community of practice that promoted analysis and reflection. In this community, they felt welcomed and valued regardless of their professional background. The social space served as a platform to share and construct context-appropriate language teaching pedagogies informed by critical and collective reflections. The collective dimension was also noted in the teachers' sharing of ideas and materials, an activity which confirms the value of the ateneo as a space for exchanging pedagogical resources (Garro & Strazza Tello, 2012).

In addition to the social aspect, the participants also valued the personalized, individual space the initiative generated in practice. Interaction and the tutor's formative feedback, mostly worded as questions, allowed the teachers to appropriate, challenge, or enrich different sources of knowledge, which empowered them to make informed decisions for practice. Tutor feedback enabled the participants to develop criticality and reflection and revisit by reflecting on and revisiting their lesson plans. Such a view may reflect De Moraes Melo and Barcia (2014) conceptualization of the ateneo as a space for professional autonomy development. The teachers added aspects that may support teachers in shaping their own decisions.

In line with the specialized literature (Cecotti et al., 2018; Clavijo et al., 2012), the ateneo gradually helped the teachers analyze, reflect on, systematize, and transform their practices. Thus, it was envisaged as a learning-oriented form of professional development because it enabled the teachers to invigorate their teaching. As a learning-oriented CPD form, what our study highlights is, as discussed above, the dialogic component of the ateneo.

The features the teachers identified as constitutive elements of the ateneo are the result of the impact they experienced with their own professional development. As suggested in De Vries et al. (2013), the ateneo was a successful CPD model because it was oriented to professional learning by exploring the teachers' situated practices within a supportive community of practice. The ateneo was not constructed on best practices,

but on good and doable practices which responded, or sought to respond, to the context in which the teaching and learning processes were embedded.

Concerning teaching skills, the participants mentioned central aspects such as the development of topic-based lessons contextualized in the learners' world, effective sequencing and transitioning from less to more demanding activities, class time management, and the maximizing of materials and learners' prior knowledge. In relation to professional knowledge, the teachers expressed having expanded their rationale by incorporating new knowledge or revisiting prior knowledge in light of the discussions and teachers' stories that emerged in each meeting.

Our study confirms that when CPD models are based on situated learning and supported by peers and experts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), teacher reflection surfaces as a major contributor to their knowledge base (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019). Whether reflection was personal or collective (Farrell, 2018a; Sprott, 2019), the teachers could appropriate and make sense of the tensions between theory (external and internal) and practice. This shift in their attitude contributed to their development of agency, which, in turn, allowed them to generate decisions that were informed in the reflection-generated knowledge co-constructed as the ateneo unfolded. It should be highlighted that the ateneo appeared to have contributed to the participants' professional development in their identity and agency as teachers; however, the data did not show whether they considered the possibility of becoming experts in the area of professional practice so that they could lead similar ateneos in their own institutions. This may be due to the fact that the ateneo sought to support teachers as practitioners and did not seek to help them become leaders or experts in professional practice so that they could lead similar ateneos.

Conclusion

In this study we investigated one form of CPD, the ateneo, which has not often been discussed in international, English-medium outlets. However, we believe that our study has resonances for other contexts beyond our research site.

The study shows that by developing CPD models which concentrate on teachers' situated practices as cases (Yin, 2018), teachers may expand their teaching skills and professional knowledge as they reflect on their beliefs and received knowledge from previous professional courses. In this regard, the ateneo as an original CPD form allowed the teachers to address diverse issues from their context. They experienced a supportive learning environment which impacted on their agency as autonomous, yet community-driven, professionals of English language teaching. This support was achieved through peers' empathy and sharing of ideas or materials; it was also possible due to the comprehensive and dialogic tutor feedback.

Despite the positive findings reported, our study was not free from limitations. First, our study was carried out with a small number of participants. However, this number responded to the personalized nature of the CPD model under investigation. Second, the participants' responses may have been conditioned by our positionality as researchers and ateneo tutors assessing our own practices as tutors even when the attention was placed on the participants. After all, the impact of the ateneo as an innovative CPD form depended on our own professional practices and decisions. Last, the study did not examine the sustainability of the participants' reported benefits through a follow-up

study that would investigate the participants' perceptions and practices after, for example, a year of completing the ateneo.

Our experience may invite other teacher educators and administrators, regardless of the subject-matter, to design and deliver CPD opportunities which are centred on lesson planning and materials development as an ignition point to explore different areas of teachers' professional development. In this regard, it is vital that these participatory opportunities are tailored in ways that promote teachers' situated practices and agency. It is also vital that the tutors or facilitators are legitimate experts and teachers who have a firm understanding of what teachers experience in the broader context they share.

While in this study, the ateneo only involved EFL teachers, future studies may examine the effects of ateneos on groups of teachers with different subject-matter specializations to understand the synergy that may operate within a further heterogeneous professional community. Such studies could compare the effects immediately after the ateneo is completed and after a term or a year.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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